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Truman and Espionage

FORMER PRESIDENT Truman's recent on-the-cuff comments on espionage are a little puzzling.

Declaring he had rejected as not "proper" a Cold War message over Kees's during his administration, Truman explained: "Espionage is a dirty deal. I don't want to be part of it." Provoked by news such as that our government hadn't carried out espionage activities to pay his administration, he admitted reluctantly, "I suppose so."

But, Truman added, although he received "a lot of reports" as president, he didn't want to know where they came from, repeating for emphasis that he "didn't want anything to do with the dirtiness of spying on other people."

And it is in fact known that Truman, as president, had emotional misgivings about espionage; he once said he was afraid of building up "a gestapo." But apparently once the realities of international life in an unfriendly world were pointed out to him, the former president forewent personal prejudices and acted responsibly.

In the fall of 1945, Truman abolished the wartime office of strategic services (OSS) and transferred its espionage functions to the state department, writing Secretary Byrnes: "I particularly desire that you take the lead in developing a comprehensive and co-ordinated foreign intelligence program for all federal agencies concerned with that type of activity."

When that arrangement didn't work out, Truman issued an executive order Jan. 22, 1946, establishing the "central intelligence group," an interdepartmental organization which operated under an executive council and the "national intelligence authority." According to Truman's own memoirs, "At last, a co-ordinated method had been worked out, and a practical way found for keeping the president informed of what was known and what was going on."

And finally, in 1947 when the central intelligence agency was created, Truman signed the legislation creating it and subsequently appointed the CIA's first two directors, Adm. Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter (1947) and Gen. Walter Bedell Smith (1953).

Truman's past record with respect to the various intelligence agencies seems solid enough. It is only his present memory that is faulty.

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